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AUTHOR Arthur, Gwen
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ABSTRACT

Arguing that good interpersonal interactions between library staff and their patrons is a major determinant of overall patron satisfaction, this paper describes Temple University's customer service training program for its public services staff. Dubbed the "A+ Service" program, the program focuses on six aspects of library service: (1) importance of quality service; (2) components of service, including the service strategy, systems, and customers; (3) teamwork; (4) communication skills, including image presentation; (5) sensitivity and responsiveness to customers; and (6) complaint management. Also highlighted in the report are the origins of the service program; the scheduling, content, and activities of the customer service program; staff responses to the program; and on-the-job considerations. A time schedule of the program events concludes the paper. (16 references) (MAB)

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CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING FOR PUBLIC SERVICES STAFF AT TEMPLE UNIVERSITY'S CENTRAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

Gwen Arthur
Coordinator of Reference Desk Services
Reference and Information Services
Samuel Paley Library
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pa. 19122

April 1990

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CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING FOR PUBLIC SERVICES STAFF AT TEMPLE UNIVERSITY'S CENTRAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

Introduction

The findings of private sector research on customer service, which increasingly suggest that "interpersonal quality of service is a major determinant of overall customer/patron satisfaction," have not been lost on libraries.[1] Articles in library journals have emphasized how public services staff set the tone for patron/staff interaction and may affect the view the patron holds of the entire institution.[2] Some unobtrusive studies have also suggested that accuracy of reference responses may be more positively related to staff use of particular communication behaviors than to size of collection or knowledge of sources.[3] One researcher has even suggested that patron "willingness to return to the same staff member at a later time" might be a more useful measure of successful reference service than accuracy of answers.[4]

Hobson, Moran, and Stevens have noted that conclusions to be drawn from customer service research include (1) systematic interpersonal skills training is vital in providing quality service (2) jobs involving service to and frequent contact with the public are stressful and demanding and (3) comprehensive performance evaluation and effective incentives are necessary for maintaining improved quality of service.[5] All three of these conclusions are relevant to libraries. This report is concerned in particular with the two factors of (1) service training and

(2) service stress. It focuses on the staff training program planned at Temple University's Central Library System to provide public services staff with support in both these areas. After all, implementing training that both prepares library employees to work well with the public and to deal with the stress which may accompany public contact is an important step toward providing quality service. Moreover, commitment to training for public services staff is possible within any institution, regardless of the evaluation and reward structure within the institution.

Temple's Commitment to Service

At Temple University there has been just such a commitment to service both within the Central Library System and other parts of the university. In Spring 1989 Temple launched a university-wide program of customer service training. Dubbed the "A+ Service" program, it is one of the first such programs in higher education. Preceding that effort, the Central Library System in Fall 1988 initiated a program which addressed the expressed needs of staff and administrators for a consistent, library-wide program of library staff orientation and public services training to supplement the technical and job-specific training already received by employees.[6] The library's orientation program provides new employees with an introduction to its facilities, resources, and policies via guided and self-guided tours, brief exercises, and use of a library manual. The broader library staff development program is designed to provide employees with

instruction on basic library resources (such as Temple's online catalog and serials list) and training in service skills. While orientation for new employees is important, this report's focus is on the public services component of the Central Library System's program.

Origins of the Service Program

The goals of Temple's new library-wide orientation and public services program included providing "additional staff development opportunities in the form of sessions covering a variety of topics of particular relevance to those in public service including... communication skills."[7] The objectives of the session focusing on communication skills stated that, after attending the session, staff should be able to:

(1) Determine patron needs through effective communication and either provide the service or refer the patron to someone who can

(2) Greet and interact with patrons in ways which encourage patrons to ask for assistance

(3) React politely, patiently, and pleasantly when problems arise at the desk.[8]

Factors which were considered in planning this session included:

(1) the session's participants: the program needed to be expansive enough to appeal to the diverse group which library staff members represent

(2) the variety of public service responsibilities library-wide: universal issues of public service needed to

be focused on, so as to assure relevance to staff performing a variety of functions, from stamping books to providing advanced reference

(3) pertinence to library issues: attention needed to be given to making any communication-oriented program library-specific.

In addressing these concerns it was thought that, since level of formal education and administrative skill do not necessarily equate with level of service skill, it was indeed appropriate for staff of all levels from clerk to paraprofessional to librarian and department head to attend. The planned session focused on communication skills applicable to any service interaction in order to assure relevance to all public services staff. Moreover, as plans for this public services session evolved, the human resources director of the university became involved with library staff on the project. Her usual service program was adapted for library staff by using role-plays depicting library situations and including discussion of systems problems specific to the library. The library program's emphasis became one of quality service based on certain basics of good communication and customer service.

The Customer Service Focus

Some may argue that academic libraries do not serve customers but rather patrons. However, while patrons in libraries may have different expectations regarding available commodities and services (including library instruction, computerized information

sources, special collections, etc.) than customers in other service settings, in many instances there is no substantive difference in how the two groups-- customers or patrons--expect to be treated. Point 1: library staff resemble service workers from other environments whose interactions with users--including provision of information--often encompass both the production and consumption of the service.[9] Point 2: quality service is based mostly on tenets of positive communication and interpersonal skills that are applicable across a variety of interactions. True, a successful reference interaction may also require advanced interviewing and question negotiation skills, but even that most complex of librarian/patron interactions is rooted firmly on these same basics of service. This is evidenced by research such as that conducted by Joan Durrance in which subjects indicated they were more willing to return to reference staff whom they rated low in interviewing skills than those they rated low in interpersonal skills.[10]

This focus on customer service ultimately not only connected the Central Library System's program with expertise on service university-wide, but also provided a focus for the program which made it relevant to a variety of public service functions. In addition to covering positive communication behaviors, training for customer service emphasized problem-solving skills applicable to a variety of services rather than strategies specific to any one function, such as reference. For instance, the session included complaint management and stress management--particularly

useful for reserves and circulation staff dealing with patrons irate over fines or overdue books--and image presentation and sensitivity to customers--important for all public service functions.

The Customer Service Program: Scheduling, Content, and Activities

The customer service program was three hours long and was scheduled on three different dates during November/December 1988, so that all of the library's public services staff (including branch staff) could attend. The group defined as public services staff was very broad: it included staff from special collections and collection development as well as the traditional public services of circulation, reserve, interlibrary loan, current periodicals, and reference. The philosophy held was that many staff from departments other than those normally thought of as public service ones do interact with patrons on a regular basis and would thus also benefit from the service program. If there hadn't been space and time constraints, technical service staff also would have been invited.[11] Department heads were advised of dates well in advance so that they could accommodate staff attendance and still maintain service desk coverage. To assure a mix of participants, staff from different departments having various responsibilities attended each session. Each session was held in the lecture hall of the main, centrally-located library, easily accessible to most staff members. The room itself is large and comfortable, with good lighting and moveable seating.

The program specifically focused on six aspects of service:

(1) importance of quality service

(2) components of service, including the service strategy, systems, customers[12]

(3) teamwork

(4) communication skills, including image presentation

(5) sensitivity to customers, including responsiveness

(6) complaint management, including:

remaining calm

allowing the customer to vent

asking questions

suggesting solutions

taking action.

In her introduction, the program's leader (Temple's Director of Human Resources Development) focused on the importance of "A+ Service" (the phrase coined to describe the university's customer service training program) in the academic environment. During this part of the program, she elaborated on concerns specific to the higher education setting, including competition for student enrollment and retention in a period when the college-age population is declining. She also discussed more general service trends, including heightened customer service expectations and personalizing the bureaucratic environment. Also covered was Karl Albrecht's "Service triangle" which stresses the importance of the three components of service: strategy, systems, and people.[13] The program leader emphasized that sometimes, but not

always, good people can make up for failures in the other two areas-- but rarely can strong strategies and systems work without good people.

Next, library staff participated in two group exercises in order to break the ice in a session which up until then had been primarily lecture. In the first exercise, the Temple "T" puzzle, competing groups raced each other to piece together an intricate puzzle of the Temple University "T" logo (the emphasis here being on the teamwork needed within groups to successfully analyze and construct the puzzle). In the next exercise participants split into pairs with one person giving the other exclusively verbal directions (with no visual cues) on how to fold and tear a paper in order to create a particular design. This paper tear/paper fold exercise was designed to illustrate the importance of unambiguous, clear communication in getting a project done properly.

How do the two key factors of teamwork and clear communication demonstrated by these exercises work to effect quality service? Teamwork does so via promoting better relations among departments and staff; communication by emphasizing positive behaviors which facilitate patron satisfaction. Both of these service elements can also reduce stress for employees. All around, effective communication can be the key to minimizing misunderstandings between people, reducing the potential for stressful interactions both between co-workers and between staff and patrons.

The next part of the program consisted of a review of the university's A+ Service standards, many of which emphasize appropriate communication behaviors, including smiling, greeting the patron, making eye contact. These gestures, many of which we take for granted, project a positive image to the patron, and are important to the overall impression that a staff person creates. Beyond these basic, positive service behaviors, sensitivity to customers through asking interested questions and following through on (and when possible resolving) problems were addressed here. Overall, sensitivity and good communication are somewhat analogous to those good living habits that medical professionals encourage us to follow in order to maintain good health and prevent disease: they are service strategies which can often prevent complaints before they happen.

The final part of the program touched on service stress, specifically on how to deal calmly and effectively with complaints. Customer service experts have noted time and time again that staff in service positions may experience stress as a result of their repeated interactions with customers who are in effect strangers to them.[14] Public services staff in libraries may also suffer from stress as a result of their frequent, even constant, interaction with patrons. When the patron is a complaining one, the situation is even more stressful. The group leader detailed strategies of handling complaints ("complaint management"), including remaining calm, retaining objectivity (that is, not taking the complaint personally), listening without

interruption, allowing the patron to vent, asking questions, using feedback, offering alternatives where possible, and--an important stress reducer-- referring the problem to a supervisor when necessary. The participants then practiced some of these same strategies in role-plays depicting staff interactions with complaining patrons. The session concluded with "If Looks Could Kill", a humorous video sketching the service problems encountered by one weary customer and summarizing the basics of good service and complaint management.[15] While not set in the library, the video focused on aspects of customer service applicable to a variety of service settings.

After the Fact: Staff Response and On-the-Job Considerations

Staff evaluated the program at its conclusion, rating quite highly the relevance of the overall program to their positions (a 3.4 average on a 4-point scale, 4.0 being the most positive rating). They indicated that many of the program's suggested strategies on how to work better with fellow staff, communicate with patrons, and deal with complaints would be useful to them on-the-job and that they planned to apply some of them there. By their responses, most staff also indicated that they recognized that, while the university is not competing for "customers" in quite the same way as private, commercial businesses do, there are elements of service common to both environments. Only one staff person commented that the program was too "customer-oriented" rather than "patron-oriented." Overall, participants reported that this session helped them tune in to

"people skills," many of which they recognized as applicable to a variety of service environments, including their own.

External criteria are measures of on-the-job performance or application of skills used to evaluate training effectiveness.[16] Ideally one should also consider external criteria in training program evaluation. Unfortunately, we at Temple for this program did not. This issue of external evaluation remains a sticking point in many such service training programs, not just Temple's. External evaluation of services is particularly difficult, partly because (1) there are so many variables--personal, situational, environmental--that can impact on service apart from the training and the individuals involved and (2) libraries often do not have the resources to mount programs that examine and measure on-the-job behaviors before and after training. While Temple's Central Library System did not comprehensively measure on-the-job performance as a follow-up to the service program described, the library has recently initiated a library-wide performance evaluation program, parts of which focus on service skills for public services staff. Moreover, during the semester following the library-wide service training, the Reference and Information Services Department introduced a departmental program focused on positive communication skills. The RIS program dovetailed nicely with the earlier library-wide customer service program, encouraging on-the-job application of similar service behaviors--and other skills more specific to reference situations--via peer coaching. The Central Library System's Staff Orientation and

Training Committee is currently evaluating the public service program overall and considering ways to assure that skills and information presented during training are indeed learned and applied. As necessary as orientation and training, involving staff throughout the library in activities which support on-the-job performance is critical to supplying them with what they need to provide quality service.

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3. Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward, "Improving Reference Service: Results of a Statewide Study," Library Journal 110: 32-35 (November 1, 1985).

4. Joan C. Durrance, "Reference Success: Does the 55 Percent Rule Tell the Whole Story?" Library Journal 114: 34 (April 15, 1989).

5. Hobson, Moran, and Stevens, "Circulation/Reserve Desk Personnel Effectiveness," p. 93.

6. Gwen Arthur et al. Library-Wide Staff Orientation and Public Services Training. Report of the Task Force. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University, Central Library System, 1988). ERIC Document # 308 868.

7. Ibid., p. 11.

8. Ibid.

9. Ron Zemke, "Supervising Service Workers," Training 25: 62 (October 1988); Thomas W. Shaughnessy, "The Search for Quality," Journal of Library Administration 8: 7 (Spring 1987).

10. Durrance, "Reference Success," p. 35.

11. All library staff who didn't attend these sessions were invited to participate in the university-wide customer service program in later semesters.

12. Karl Albrecht, Service America (Homebrook, Illinois: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1985), pp. 40-43.

13. Ibid.

14. Ron Zemke, The Service Edge: 101 Companies that Profit from Customer Care (New York: New American Library, 1989), p. 65.

15. If Looks Could Kill: The Power of Behaviour (videorecording), (Northbrook, IL: Video Arts, Inc., 1986).

16. Hobson, Moran, and Stevens, "Circulation/Reserve Desk Personnel Effectiveness," p. 95.

APPENDIX

PALEY LIBRARY
A+ SERVICE TRAINING

Wednesday, November 30	Wednesday, December 7	Wednesday, December 14
2:00 - 4:00PM	9:00 - 11:00AM	9:00 - 11:00AM

Schedule

I. Importance of A+ Service

II. Components of Service - The Service Triangle

III. Teamwork

IV. Communications Skills

V. Sensitivity to Customers - Service Standards

VI. Video - "If Looks Could Kill"

VII. Complaint Management